

SURVIVABILITY IS ADAPTABILITY

BIOLOGY CAN PROVIDE A
USEFUL INSIGHT INTO THE
THREE MAIN BARRIERS THAT
PREVENT US EMBRACING
CHANGE IN THE WORKPLACE.

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BACTERIA ARE MASTERS AT ADAPTABILITY. The most successful bacteria have a memory that allows them to respond to a threat and execute a response almost instantly. Then, after the threat is gone, they wipe their response memory clean in order to remain fully adaptable to the environments they are in, without being hung up on how they responded to the last threat. They're not burdened by the past. For them, survivability is adaptability.

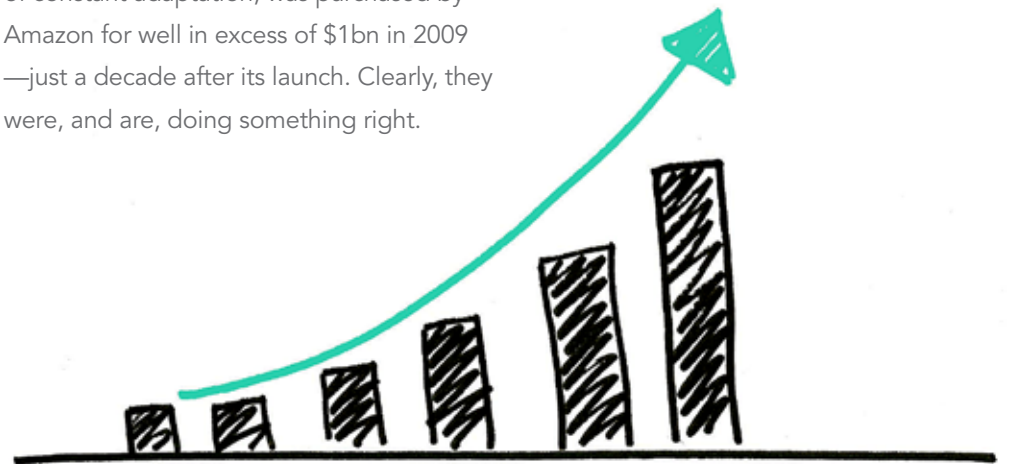
What if, a business operating in its chosen marketplace could apply these same principles? Imagine if it were unencumbered by established processes, practices, beliefs, and infrastructure—how much faster could it react to market change?

When we think about how much we rely on existing knowledge, past experience and history to guide us in our decision-making, the concept of applying this kind of 'wait and see' approach can—at first— seem counterintuitive.

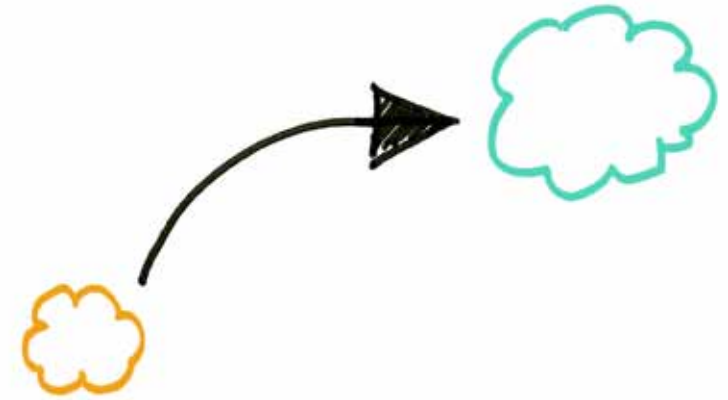
Yet, companies like **Zappos.com** have already used a strong focus on adaptability to create a successful alternative business model. One of their core values —'embrace and drive change'—reflects the link that they have made between evolution in nature and in business:

"We are ever evolving. If we want to continue to stay ahead of our competition, we must continually change and keep them guessing... As long as embracing constant change is a part of our culture, they will not be able to evolve as fast as we can." – Zappos.com

Zappos, founded and run on the principles of constant adaptation, was purchased by Amazon for well in excess of \$1bn in 2009—just a decade after its launch. Clearly, they were, and are, doing something right.



EMBRACING THE NEED TO CONSISTENTLY EVOLVE IS A MORE ROBUST STRATEGIC PRINCIPLE FOR THE WORLD WE LIVE IN TODAY than the traditional focuses of scale, productivity and efficiency. But achieving this requires a dynamic, bottom-up strategy execution model and this is not an easy shift for many companies.



First, it requires giving up the comforting idea that with enough research and enough data, professional strategists can predict the future and plan for it. The issue here is that this approach relies on the threats and opportunities that strategists see when they are writing the plan remaining relatively static until it is implemented. Given that we are all now operating in an era of heightened volatility, instability and accelerating change, this is increasingly unlikely.

The reality is, any strategy is always —by its nature —a strategy for now. We have data, we have trends, but these will only lead us to predictions, and every prediction is flawed.

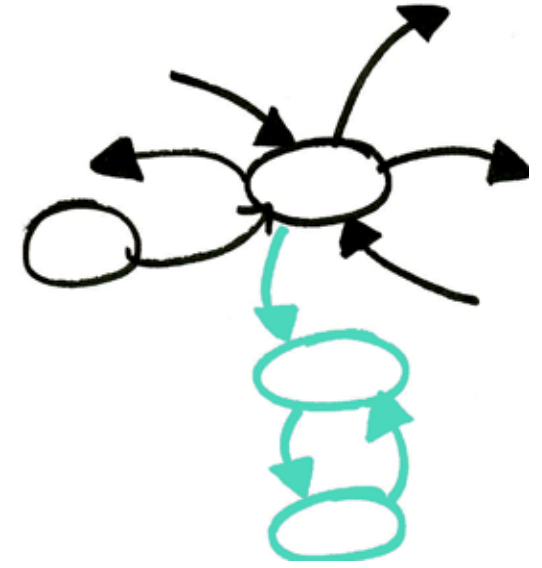
This doesn't mean that we throw out every element of planning and strategic intent, but it does mean that we begin to see the flaws that this approach has inherently, and look to build our adaptive capabilities to combat them.

Once we begin to accept that we don't know what's ahead, and that any prediction is just an educated guess, we can begin to shape a business to be more agile and adapt when the next challenge or opportunity does become clear. To do this, we need to look closely at the three main barriers that might prevent us from embracing change:

- **The way we think** —our collective decision-making and accepted wisdom
- **The process and practices** we've created around us
- **The infrastructure** we rely on to do our work

The established processes, practices, beliefs, and infrastructure that we rely upon to make our business decisions are the very things that can stop us from adapting quickly to change. Bacteria don't have this—they forget what happened yesterday and focus all their energy on adapting to what's happening today.

IT'S EASY TO SEE HOW THE NEW BREED OF TECH COMPANIES MIGHT BE ABLE TO APPLY THIS KIND OF RADICAL APPROACH, yet even in a mature technology-driven marketplace, such as a call centre, the biological principles of adaptability and of just-in-time thinking can be applied.



We know that managing capacity with respect to labor in a call center is critical because the labor is the most expensive component. One of its biggest challenges is to deal with the fluctuating nature of the work, especially around peak calling times. If peak calling times are at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. how is staff productivity maintained in the intervening three hours?

Outsourcing whole departments to a location where labor is cheaper is one way to overcome this. However, the waste is still there, it just costs less as result of the labor arbitrage.

Companies such as **KellyConnect** have taken a more innovative approach to this problem. Using **Cloud Computing** and remote managing and mentoring, KellyConnect can fluctuate the labor pool in accordance to real-time call activity. By creating a distributed workforce, including at-home workers, they have been able to create the kind of flexibility that works for their clients and employees.

This sort of technology-led optimization is applicable not just in call centers, but anywhere distributed workers need to be coordinated or directed centrally. And it also allows business to tap into a new labor

force—one that wants and needs this kind of flexibility to be able to participate in work.

This 'workforce virtualization' is wholly enabled by technological change and it means that there is an increasing array of jobs, and elements of jobs, that can be tasked to individuals in any part of the globe. Of course, this assists companies to access talent wherever it is, which will become increasingly critical as global demographic shifts see talent pools drying up in most developed nations. Workforce virtualization is one way to be more adaptable, but there are others.

It's clear, even without a crystal ball to rely upon, that HR practice needs to evolve to capture these new opportunities and to help business adapt more quickly to market forces. To find the right people at the right time, to foster flexible and adaptive thinking, and to embed a culture that thrives on change, the way we think about our workforce will have to adapt as well.

"IF YOU LIVE AMONG WOLVES, YOU NEED TO HOWL LIKE A WOLF"

RUSSIAN PROVERB

THIS IS **PART 3** OF *LIVING AMONG WOLVES*, A WHITEPAPER SERIES EXPLORING THE FOUR FORCES DRIVING THE UPTAKE OF HR OUTSOURCING.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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